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U.S. Foreign Policy: Bloopers and Blunders

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"We Will Bury You!"

When Nikita Khrushchev made that threat (or was it a prediction?) years ago, he probably was counting on the availability of Western shovels—on favorable credit terms. It's doubtful that he foresaw the eagerness with which the U.S. and the West generally have taken on the job of digging their own graves. He might have believed, however, that the Soviet system would in due course out-produce as well as out-gun the capitalist economies of the West. Not likely, to be sure, in fair competition. But who said fair?

In "Grave New World" (Oxford University Press, 244 pages, \$17.95), it is Michael



Bookshelf

"Grave New World"
By Michael Ledeen

Ledeen's imaginative thesis that U.S. foreign policy has fallen victim to amateurish incoherence, even as evidence accumulates that the sclerotic Soviet elite is presiding over the shambles of a socioeconomic system that runs—insofar as it runs at all—on pervasive corruption propped up by world-wide technological espionage. No one anywhere is in charge anymore, although the Soviets do manage, barely, to hold their empire together and exploit targets of opportunity around the periphery. Minor adventurers make mischief. The world lurches from crisis to crisis. And a dangerous and increasingly unpredictable world it is.

Mr. Ledeen is something of a MIRV among the new generation of geopoliticians: scholar, witness, reporter and participant (as a consultant to high officials in our defense and diplomatic establish-

ments). He possesses a barbed wit and a shrewd eye for the revealing vignette. His book is filled with them:

- An account of the 1982 Lebanese war and its aftermath. Here he documents the U.S. genius for snatching defeat from the jaws of victory—Israel's potentially total victory, which created opportunities that the U.S. failed to exploit.

- An extended parenthesis detailing the U.S. refusal, despite a mountain of circumstantial evidence, to recognize any Soviet hand in the plot to kill the pope, and the fall-back position that such a recognition would be too frightening to face.

- A rich menu of Soviet technological espionage in strategic industries, emphasizing the lead role of the Romanians.

- A quick review of the shah's fall in Iran, an elaboration in effect of the truism that pursuit of the perfect is the enemy of the best-available-in-the-circumstances.

- A brief discussion of the shabby treatment by the U.S. of the nascent Spanish democracy prepared by Francisco Franco, which illustrates the difference between often reversible authoritarian and (so far) irrevocable totalitarian regimes.

Now for the bad news. "Grave New World" is more vignettes than it is book. It obviously has been stitched together from occasional pieces, and the seams show—not least in the shifting time frame, which entraps Mr. Ledeen's discussion of the "problem" of Soviet succession in the very midst of what seems to be the smooth Gorbachev transition. In the long run, of course, Mr. Ledeen may be right that leadership changes are one of many continuing strains on a failed Soviet system.

On the U.S. side, as Mr. Ledeen sees it, villains abound. After Vietnam and Watergate, a media elite arrogates the power to make or break governments. Congress demands a role in the formulation and micro-management of foreign policy, and mostly creates confusion. Virtually unenforceable libel laws make public servants fair game

for vicious character assassination. Lawyers weigh in with a no-lose invocation of First Amendment protection for every media excess. We have rule by the calculated leak, always from the highest (unnamed) sources. And, as one result of all this, many of our best and brightest eschew public service.

So what is to be done? Mr. Ledeen is gutsy enough to offer a number of prescriptions. Imprudent may be the more apt word. Some of his "solutions" are well-intentioned nonstarters: Enact "tighter" libel laws, for example, and establish a "watchdog" over the media with the authority to "enforce" sanctions—to which my reaction is, good luck. Some are simply off-the-wall: He sort of nominates former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt as national security adviser to the president.

In the end I think that Mr. Ledeen attempts to solve the wrong problem. Is it foreign policy "incoherence" that defeats our purpose? Is the basic failure one of process? Or is it the absence of the right strategic design, clearly articulated, backed by prudent applications of power and the rallying of national will?

Jimmy Carter's foreign policy was not so much incoherent as it was wrong. Time and again, with great coherence, it dis-served the U.S. national interest. Ronald Reagan's is marked by inconsistency: sometimes very much on target, other times timid and futile. Distinguishing the former from the latter is, I should think, the beginning of useful wisdom about the course we ought to be pursuing. At the very least, Michael Ledeen identifies a good many of the culs-de-sac and potholes along the way.

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